

OXFORD

MAGAZINE

No. 456 Noughth Week Michaelmas Term 2023

Little has changed for the better since our last issue. Inflation inflates costs cumulatively. Strikes throughout many sectors no longer merit headlines, including for the first time an unprecedented combined strike of consultants and junior doctors. The on-off strikes in universities over the last five years never roused obvious public concern. No solutions are in sight and the debilitating effects are likely to stretch far into the future.

In many UK universities, the academic year has started with industrial action by UCU members, while the union ballots again on further strikes. The marking and assessment boycott (MAB) that caused widespread disruption over the summer is now over, after members voted to discontinue the measure in a poll notable for its low turnout.¹ In Oxford, the effects of the MAB had been patchy. Students in some subjects – degrees with Politics, in particular, but also History and Modern Languages – graduated with missing marks, no classification, or in some cases no confirmation even of passing their degree. At prelims, many students were waved, irrespective of having marks or not, into second year, in a rehash of COVID-19 “mitigations”. For those colleagues with marking duties who adhered to the industrial action, it will have been an unenviable task to mark scripts at the same time as preparing for the start of term. But as the new call to ballot illustrates, the issues around pay, conditions, workload and casualization have not disappeared.

The second matter in dispute, the USS pension scheme, does seem to be moving towards a partial resolution. Scheme members will be “consulted” on improvements that will see the scheme broadly return to pre-2022 levels of contribution and benefits, a tacit admission that the changes forced through were, as many argued at

SOMETHING NEEDS TO CHANGE

the time, unnecessary and unjustified.² The recent communications to scheme members are likely to be welcome, but in highlighting technicalities and changing context, paint a rather genteel picture of the scheme’s management and history. Contributory factors in this about turn that cannot be forgotten were major industrial action from UCU and the David-against-Goliath efforts of legal activists – the largely

crowd-funded Save Pensions and the Planet group – in attempting to sue USS directors, getting as far as the Court of Appeal.³

While there may be better news on pensions, the issue of pay will not disappear. The University’s salary “uplift” of 3%⁴ comes against a background in which CPI has not fallen below 6% for over a year, and broken 10% p.a. in some months. UCU gives a figure of 25% for the amount in real terms by which members’ salaries have fallen since 2009.⁵ Even with the current correction to UK house prices, Oxford will continue to be unaffordable for all but the wealthiest colleagues looking for much more than a *pied-à-terre*. Social and other media gave plenty of space to the fate of our colleague who now finds herself having to commute from Dublin, so inflated is accommodation in the city.⁶

The Vice-Chancellor has shown herself alive to these issues in her first year in office, tasking a working party to review and report on pay and conditions. A series of workshops and other events are planned for the autumn, with some initial findings promised soon on Professional Services pay, although there is no news on academic salaries.⁷ The University is constrained, both by collective bargaining and by student fee income that has been frozen at £9,250 since 2017. Oxford is well placed in com-

INSIDE

• OFFICE FOR STUDENTS
Pages two, three

• BRIDGING OXFORD
Page seven

• TITLES MATTER
Page nineteen

...and much more

parison to other UK institutions to raise income through other sources, but named chairs and shiny buildings – the most conspicuous results of the previous leadership’s philanthropy drives – do not improve the lot of those at the chalkface. Oxford is less unionised than other institutions, but the local branch seems to have lines of communication to Wellington Square that function rather better than the relationship at national level between UCU and the employers’ association, UCEA. The University might look at recent developments at KCL for how a local deal could be agreed.⁸ How much anger and energy there is for further industrial action remains to be seen.

* * *

“The higher education sector faces a looming crisis.” So begins the Lords Review of the Office for Students published as Parliament returned from its summer recess. It had heard evidence over many months and received 58 submissions – ranging from informed opinions from individuals to corporate responses from universities and representative bodies, including one from the OfS itself (11,000 words long or a little over a third of the length of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, as commentators drily noted)

Oxford’s submission was highly critical:

“Our experience is both that the OfS often strays beyond its regulatory objectives,The bureaucratic burden OfS imposes on universities is grossly disproportionate to the risks it is managing. The volume of documentation OfS produces is overwhelming – its policy and consultation documents ran to 420,000 words in 2020 and 597,000 words in 2021. (The latter word-count is slightly longer than War and Peace.) A single OfS release in July 2022 was over 200,000 words, and at one point in 2022 OfS was running three consultations in parallel, asking HE institutions to respond to 200 separate consultation questions.”

The Lords agreed in more explicit terms:

“It is clear that the poor relationship between the OfS and providers has been in part because the OfS’ approach has been overly distant and combative. It gives the impression that it is seeking to punish rather than support providers towards compliance, while taking little note of their views.”

The Lords concluded that:

“from imposing spelling and grammar requirements on providers to its opaque approach to defining student interests, there have been too many examples of the OfS acting like an instrument of the Government’s policy agenda rather than an independent regulator. It is vital that regulators have both real and perceived independence from Government, and the OfS has a lot of work to do on this.”

Coming from the politicians themselves one really has to wonder who, if anybody, is in charge and taking responsibility. They created an OfS which is so obviously failing, but leave it to the OfS to reform itself. The OfS is itself unable to reform because of the wide (but flexible) terms of its duties under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 but more importantly because it is directly beholden to the Government which controls university fi-

nances through immigration policy and the student fee, unchanged since 2012 (despite over 50% inflation since).

Universities’ dependence on student fees stems from the Browne Review of 2010 at the time of the incoming Tory regime. The brainchild of David Willetts, it sought to create a free market driven by students as paying customers. As the Lords note:

“A crucial part of the Government’s vision for HERA was increasing competition in the higher education sector through encouraging new providers with innovative methods. We heard that delivery in this area had fallen short of these ambitions and that new providers had struggled with long, bureaucratic processes.”

The OfS Chair, Lord Wharton, defended the OfS in the following terms: “go back to the days of HEFCE, when every region had its own co-ordinator, had lots of very close meetings with the universities and institutions” and “was there more to lend a helping hand and a friendly ear than to look in depth at what was going on ... and require them to improve it”.

The Lords “were surprised by the OfS Chair’s assertion that the sector’s finances are ‘in good shape’, which is not an assessment we share. Although there seems to be an expectation that providers will merge and consolidate in future, it is not clear that either the OfS or the Government provides strategic oversight of the long-term financial sustainability of the sector”.

B.B., T.J.H

¹ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13167/Consultation-on-marking-and-assessment-boycott-September-2023>

² See https://www.uss.co.uk/news-and-views/latest-news/2023/07/07192023_uss-consults-on-assumptions-that-would-lead-to-significantly-lower-contribution-rates-and <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13093/USS-on-course-for-restored-benefits-and-lower-contributions>

³ See <https://savepensionsandplanet.org/case-update/> and https://www.uss.co.uk/news-and-views/latest-news/2023/08/08172023_court-case-against-uss-dismissed

⁴ <https://finance.web.ox.ac.uk/salary-scales>

⁵ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/rising>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-66732639>

⁷ <https://hr.web.ox.ac.uk/pay-and-conditions-report>

⁸ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13195/Kings-College-London-staff-win-big-increase-to-London-weighting>



Reminders



Here we publish the Summary and extracts from the Report of the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee on the Office for Students, together with the response of the OfS. The Report, published 13th September 2023, is headed “Must do better” - eds*

Context

The higher education sector faces a looming crisis. Long-term problems with financial sustainability were compounded by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, with in-person teaching disrupted and acute financial pressures on providers. Subsequent inflation has increased costs for institutions, staff and students alike and eroded the value of the income providers receive from tuition fees. Reduced EU research funding is a major concern, as is the ongoing industrial action which is both caused by and has contributed to the instability in the sector. Given these problems, it is therefore vital that the sector’s regulator is fit for purpose.

The Office for Students

The higher education sector is regulated by the Office for Students (OfS), a relatively new regulator established in 2017 under the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA). The providers that the OfS regulates are diverse, and not limited to traditional universities. As its name suggests, the OfS was established explicitly as a higher education regulator with a brief to support the interests of students rather than those of higher education providers—perceived as a contrast to what had come before.

Despite this laudable aim, the OfS has so far found itself in the worst of both worlds—as a direct consequence of its own approach and Government pressure. It is not trusted by and does not have the confidence of many of the providers it regulates. But it has arguably not acted in the real interests of students either. In this report, we examine the work of the OfS and recommend actions that both the OfS and the Government should take to improve its work.

The OfS’ duties and decision-making

It is claimed that the statutory duties of the OfS are clearly set out in legislation, but they have been applied inconsistently and unequally. The regulator, and by extension the Government, has significant freedom to pick and choose which duties it prioritises, creating uncertainty. It appears not to have prioritised the autonomy of higher education providers and the principles of best regulatory practice, causing friction between the regulator and providers. Moreover, we are concerned by the OfS’ apparent view that “having regard” to its duties merely means it has to think about them, rather than evidence that it has given weight to the underlying objectives. This makes it difficult

for the OfS to be held accountable. When the OfS makes changes to its regulatory framework, it should set out how it has taken its statutory duties into account, and, where it has not done so, explain why.

In addition, the OfS has now become involved in issues such as freedom of speech and sexual harassment. The Government should review the activities of the OfS with a view to focusing on the strategic issues facing the sector.

We also found that there has been a proliferation of regulators in the higher education sector, causing duplication and red tape. We were pleased to hear that the Minister recognises this problem and intends to tackle it but request more details on how and when the Government will do so.

Financial sustainability

The current system of funding higher education is not sustainable and will lead to growing issues in the coming years, and it is far from clear to us that the OfS has paid sufficient attention to these systemic challenges. The sector faces a number of risks, particularly the freezing of the cap on tuition fees for home undergraduate students, the sector’s main source of income. Providers often make a loss when teaching domestic students and conducting research, partly because of the loss of EU research funding. This has led them to become increasingly reliant on cross-subsidy from international and postgraduate students, whose fees are not capped. This dependency comes with risks and there is a worrying complacency that this premium from international student fees can be banked for the long-term, despite an increasingly competitive international environment and the risk that geopolitical shifts could cause changes in student numbers.

While providers are responsible for managing their finances, the Government controls their main sources of income through the tuition fee cap and its influence on international student recruitment through immigration policy. It is vital that the Government urgently puts in place a stable, long-term funding model for the sector.

The OfS monitors and reports annually on financial sustainability in the higher education sector. However, it appears to focus heavily on data and less on communicating sufficiently with institutions. We heard that some providers would be unwilling to engage with the OfS in the early stages of falling into financial difficulty for fear of a punitive response, hampering their ability to plan together. We welcome that the regulator has now begun engaging with providers directly and call on it to prioritise regular discussions with providers about their finances. More broadly, however, we were surprised by the OfS Chair’s assertion that the sector’s finances are “in good shape”, which is not an assessment we share. Although there seems to be an expectation that providers will merge and consolidate in future, it is not clear that either the OfS or the Government provides strategic oversight of the long-term financial sustainability of the sector. They should clarify whether this function exists and if not, consider whether it is necessary and where it should sit.

Value for money

Given the substantial fees higher education students pay and the young age of many applicants to undergraduate courses, we welcome the OfS' focus on value for money and the quality of education. The information students receive when they apply for courses can differ greatly, which is unacceptable given the scale of the financial commitment students undertake. In order for students to be able to judge whether their courses provide value, the OfS should ensure that they receive clear, digestible information from higher education providers.

Value for money in the context of higher education is a difficult metric to measure. However, the OfS' approach to student outcomes, and particularly its focus on employment outcomes for graduates, is too simplistic and narrow. Employment outcomes are affected by a broad range of factors, and this approach has the potential both to penalise providers that take on students from disadvantaged backgrounds and to underplay the benefits of courses that are less directly vocational. We believe that the OfS should conduct further work to assess the broader value of higher education, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and including the need for future skills.

Quality, standards, choice and competition

During the passage of HERA, the sector was assured by the Government that quality and standards would be overseen by a designated body that commanded the confidence of the sector. This body was expected to be the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). However, the QAA was recently de-designated from this role, following a series of events that included its suspension from the relevant European body for quality, which the QAA blamed on the OfS' regulatory approach. Although the circumstances of these events remain unclear and contested, there is a suspicion that in its handling of them, the OfS prioritised gaining direct control of quality assurance rather than working to sustain an independent assessor as Parliament envisaged.

It is concerning that England's regulatory framework has shifted away from European quality standards. This has the potential to damage the sector's international reputation, which is key in attracting international students. We call on the OfS to align its framework with international standards and appoint the QAA or another arms-length body to perform the Designated Quality Body (DQB) role.

A crucial part of the Government's vision for HERA was increasing competition in the higher education sector through encouraging new providers with innovative methods. We heard that delivery in this area had fallen short of these ambitions and that new providers had struggled with long, bureaucratic processes. It is welcome that the OfS is seeking to address this through guidance, but it should streamline its processes further.

With the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE), the Government is promoting a more flexible higher education system which includes shorter courses and new forms of delivery. This is to be welcomed. However, there are concerns that the OfS' approach to regulation may stifle this innovation. The OfS will need to

review whether its approach is flexible enough to cover short courses and new forms of provision.

The student interest

Although the OfS was explicitly established to regulate in the interests of students, it has never clearly defined what it sees "*the student interest*" to be. In the absence of this, there is a suspicion that "the student interest" is used as a smokescreen for the political priorities of ministers. We call on the OfS to conduct detailed scoping work, informed by engagement with students, to define "the student interest" and explain how this drives its work.

The OfS has a number of mechanisms for engaging with students, including the National Student Survey, the inclusion of a student representative on its board, and its Student Panel. Although these mechanisms are welcome, it is unclear how far they drive the OfS' work. Students often feel their views are not acted upon, especially where they were not aligned with what the OfS wants to do. It was particularly concerning to hear allegations that the OfS issued veiled threats over the future of the Student Panel when panellists raised issues deemed to be of importance to students.

The OfS should set out how student input informs its decisions and open up more of its work to student involvement. It should respect the Student Panel's right to raise issues and add an extra student representative to the OfS board.

Regulatory framework and sector relations

We heard consistently from providers that the OfS' regulatory framework has become overly prescriptive and has shown a willingness to direct providers' activities, with insufficient explanation and little regard to the need to protect institutional autonomy. The OfS appears to have given insufficient attention to the impact of its requests and decisions. These have generated a significant burden for providers, particularly the volume of requests for data, often duplicating requests from other regulators but in different formats. The OfS should be more transparent about its approach, including through the publication of case studies and by making clear why it makes particular requests and decisions. The Government should reconvene the Higher Education Data Reduction Taskforce to reduce unnecessary burden on providers.

It is clear that the poor relationship between the OfS and providers has been in part because the OfS' approach has been overly distant and combative. It gives the impression that it is seeking to punish rather than support providers towards compliance, while taking little note of their views. The OfS appears to be concerned that it will be captured by the sector if it engages with providers. We welcome that the OfS has recently recognised that sector relations are an issue and we call on it to rebalance its approach and engage more with providers.

Moreover, despite its own focus on value for money to students, it is unclear whether the OfS provides value for money to providers, who pay the OfS a registration fee. The recent increase in OfS registration fees of up to 12% at a time of rising costs is challenging, particularly because it partly reflects the OfS' own expanding remit.

This has alienated providers: the OfS appears to be adding to their regulatory burdens and then charging them more as a result.

Political independence and the role of the Government

The OfS is meant to be an independent regulator and describes itself as such. Yet we found that it lacks both real and perceived independence. Both the OfS and the Government bear some responsibility for this, and both should explain how they will address this state of affairs.

The OfS' own actions often appear driven by political priorities. While it does occasionally push back against the Government, too often it translates ministerial and media attitudes into regulatory burdens. The perception that the OfS lacks independence is not aided by the fact that the OfS Chair continues to take the whip of the governing party in the House of Lords, whilst simultaneously claiming that the organisation, as a regulator, is independent of the Government. This contrasts with the recent approach of several other Members in similar positions.

As for the Government, there is a perception that their guidance letters to the OfS are too prescriptive and unusually frequent. Meanwhile, further challenges have been created by political instability and ministerial churn: since 2018, the OfS has had to work with seven Education Secretaries and six Universities Ministers.

Overall conclusions

Across these different areas of the OfS' work, there are several common threads. The first is that its relationships with many of its key stakeholders are not satisfactory: this applies not only to providers and other bodies such as the QAA, but also to students, the very people whose interests it is supposed to defend. The OfS does not engage with its stakeholders as well as it should and, when it does, there is a perception that it gives insufficient attention to their feedback.

Moreover, the OfS' approach to regulation often seems arbitrary, overly controlling and unnecessarily combative. It has been selective in choosing which of its duties to prioritise, expanded its remit into new areas and created the impression that it seeks to control and micro-manage providers. Whether in its treatment of the QAA or its requests for data from providers, it is often unclear why the OfS does many of the things that it does.

Finally, from imposing spelling and grammar requirements on providers to its opaque approach to defining student interests, there have been too many examples of the OfS acting like an instrument of the Government's policy agenda rather than an independent regulator. It is vital that regulators have both real and perceived independence from Government, and the OfS has a lot of work to do on this.

Extracts from the Report

359. In its written evidence, the OfS noted the need to refresh its approach, explaining that it is acting on an independent report published in January 2023 that identified a number of areas for improvement. The OfS' actions in response include more direct engagement with providers and better promotion of existing contact routes.

360. Lord Wharton said that "there is truth" in concerns about the OfS' engagement and relationship with the sector but that elements of this "are occasionally a little overegged". He said that the OfS is "looking at stepping up" its engagement, including through sending more senior staff to visit institutions.

362. Susan Lapworth said that the OfS' engagement is shaped by its riskbased approach to regulation, meaning

that "if we are not particularly concerned about a provider they may not hear from us very often at all". She acknowledged that this "might feel quite odd to some universities" given the closeness of their relationship with HEFCE. However, she explained that alongside the programme of visits, she is planning to hold quarterly online sessions for Vice-Chancellors.

363. The Minister argued that "there needs to be much more informal engagement between the OfS and HE", noting that in his six months in the job, "that has come up time and time again". He emphasised, though, that the OfS "does a lot of roundtables and a lot of events". DfE official Anne Spinali noted that providers "have really felt listened to" in relation to access and participation.

Responding to the Report, Lord Wharton, chair of the OfS, said:

The OfS's values include openness and seeking opportunities for learning, and the House of Lords' Industry and Regulators Committee's Inquiry provided a helpful opportunity to hear from representatives of higher education institutions, students, and policymakers, and understand these stakeholders' thoughts on our regulatory approach.

The committee's report highlights the importance of the quality and value for money of courses, as well as the financial sustainability of institutions. The committee highlights that students should be able to fairly access

high quality courses, be properly supported while they study and as they prepare for their careers. Robust regulation is important, for taxpayers and students alike, to protect their significant investment in higher education. These concerns sit at the heart of the OfS's regulatory strategy, and we welcome the committee's focus on how we can improve our impact on these issues.

The committee, and others, have been right to signal the particular importance of financial sustainability in higher education. We monitor individual institutions, gather intelligence to identify system-wide risk, and publish our analysis of financial sustainability across the sector. Our detailed analysis of the data universities provide to us sug-

gests that many are in good financial shape. We are also alive to significant risks, including the impact of a fixed undergraduate tuition fee, cost pressures and an overreliance by some on international students. Our important work in this area is often not publicly visible. But we will continue to identify risk and use the tools we have to protect the interests of students if an institution encounters financial difficulties.

The committee's report will also provide further impetus for our work to refresh the way we engage with the sector we regulate, and those for whom we regulate. We ran a programme of visits to institutions in the summer, meeting face-to-face with students and staff to hear about their experiences of higher education and the issues they

face. We have gained important insights from these visits and received positive feedback about our approach. We look forward to the next set of visits scheduled through the autumn.

We thank the committee for its work. The OfS has already taken proactive steps to address many of the issues the committee has raised, and we will consider its report carefully over the weeks ahead and respond more fully in due course.

**<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/517/industry-and-regulators-committee/news/197379/office-for-students-underperforming-amid-looming-crisis-in-higher-education/>*

Exposure

My neighbours have had the tree men in
and they've lopped off the tops and the sides.
That spindly pear
which dropped its hard little twisted fruit
brown and green, our side of the fence;
that geriatric apple tree
and the dull nondescript one
which usefully shared its shade with us
year after year.

The brown row of house-backs along the street
now stares blankly down and across
where up to this morning there used to be
our strip of straggly, bowery, shadowed space
the illusion of safe.

Well, it's good for us
I suppose
in old age
to be exposed to the world.

HERMIONE LEE

Hermione Lee held the Goldsmiths' Chair of Literature at New College from 1998 to 2008 and was President of Wolfson College from 2008 to 2017. Her books include biographies of Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Penelope Fitzgerald and Tom Stoppard.

Stanley Gibbons

On the inside cover of my uncle's album
it says 'For dear Hugh with fondest love from
Father and Mother, 1923.'
Throughout the discoloured pages
are scattered low denomination
commonplaces. But occasionally
next to a smudge where the gummed hinges had been
there appears a pencilled note
'Gibbons 4/6'; or 'may be valuable'.
I can see him now at a later point: striding out
hopefully in his unbelted mack
to show them to an informed philatelist
with a microscope who shakes his head
and hands them back, leaving him
to find another way to raise the money
to finance an afternoon of drinking.

BERNARD O'DONOGHUE

Bernard O'Donoghue is an Emeritus Fellow of Wadham College where he taught English happily for many years.

The souls of the people of Oxford

DANNY DORLING

Something was done differently on the lands of the University of Oxford during the exceedingly long summer vacation of 2023. Something that had not happened in many a year. Someone, or possibly, a group of someones, made the right call. Our tale concerns river banks, and whether they are crumbling, along with bridges and local participants; including Mole, Ratty, many young swans, and at least one otter. Old Badger was unsure whether it was wise to allow the stoats and the weasels such leniency, but relented. Toad, at first confused over the fuss, slowly came to realise that being seen as aloof, tooting as he passed the lower orders in his car, might no longer be a good look.



The events took place not far from the J.R.R. Tolkien bench in the University Parks, and they concerned, above all else, children. What was to happen to the children if access changed?

Children's stories, when told well, are of jeopardy, suspense and excitement. However, because you are not a child, I will tell you now that this story turns out well in the end. At the least, I hope it does, as the story is not over yet. It continues into the short Michaelmas term, because the bridges it concerns are still shut and the diversion I will tell you of remains in place. It will not be over until a great many years have passed, because it is the part of a much longer story, of how a city and its university changes. Of how ostensibly small things do *really* matter.

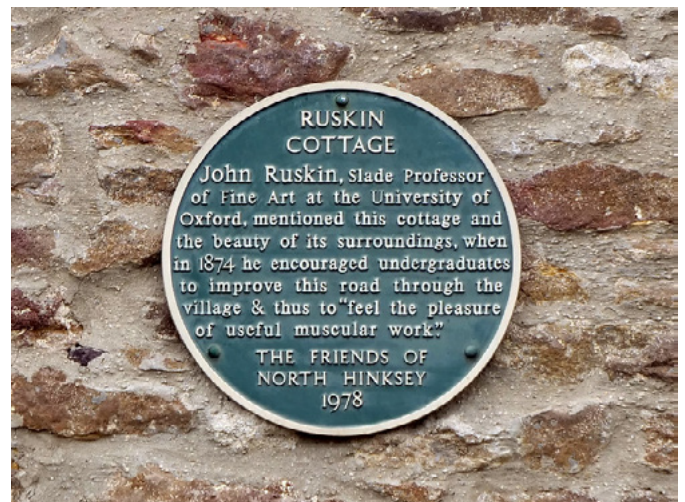
Our story begins many centuries ago, with the seizing of lands, and their dubious transfer of ownership. Its long history concerns the growth of empires and how the most insignificant of river crossings, a ford for oxen became what it is today. But for now let's skip all those centuries and begin, only 150 years ago, in 1873, when a young man, studying in Dublin decided to apply for the demys-hip to attend Magdalen College, Oxford. He won the funding and so, in the autumn of 1874, came up to read Greats. His name was Oscar.

In those days it was far harder to traverse some parts of Oxford than it is now, but much easier to move between

other parts of the city. To enter the city from the east, if not traveling on the main road, you would travel past the newly built Somerset public house,¹ and use the ferry at Marston (marsh town).

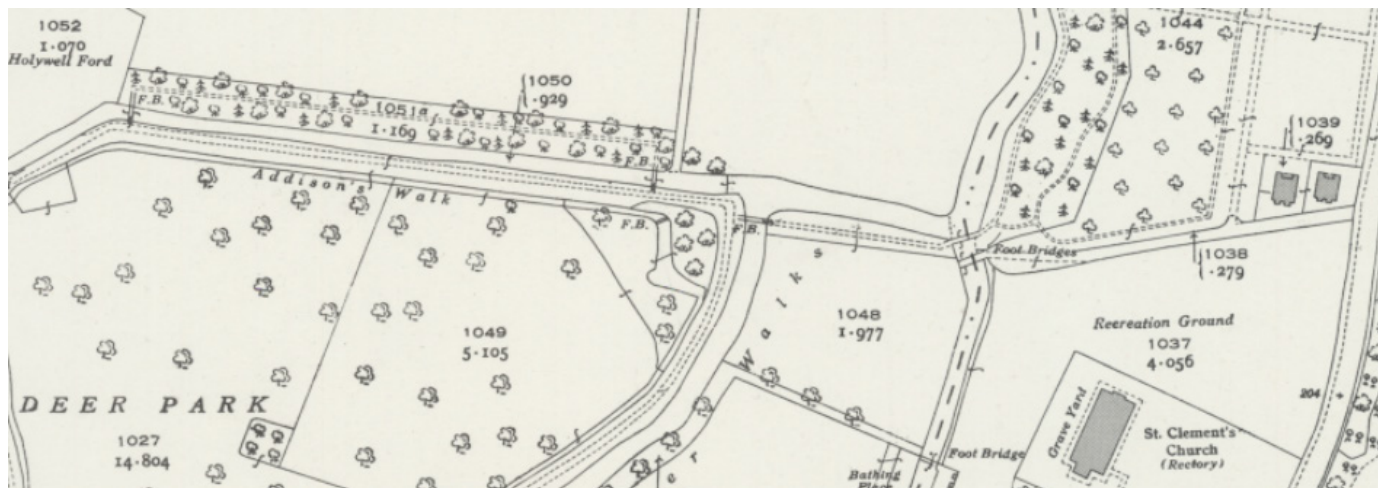
To enter the city from the west, if not travelling on the main road, you would have taken a causeway through the often-flooded fields to the Fishes pub, and then used the ferry at the back of the pub to cross the Hinksey stream. Willow Walk would not open until the 1920s, and the route via the Fishes was in disrepair.

It was a time of renewed public spiritedness. Change was in the air. The Slade Professor of Art, John Ruskin had recently established his School of Drawing and Fine Art. He gained national notoriety, and much later a plaque, when he directed his students to repair the road leading to the Fishes ferry. This was both for the common good, and so that the students should each become a little more individually buff, through exercising their muscles.²



Among the many young men Ruskin enrolled was Oscar, who was a little wild. The high-ups were not amused, and the episode was recorded in the chronicles thus: 'Most controversial, from the point of view of the University authorities, spectators and the national press, was the digging scheme' not just because it was encouraging the youngsters to use their brawn, rather than direct the labour of others, but because of what effect such activities had on the young men. The chronicle continued: 'The scheme was motivated in part by a desire to teach the virtues of wholesome manual labour. Some of the diggers, who included Oscar Wilde, Alfred Milner and Ruskin's future secretary and biographer W. G. Collingwood, were profoundly influenced by the experience: notably Arnold Toynbee, Leonard Montefiore and Alexander Robertson MacEwen. It helped to foster a public service ethic that was later given expression in the university settlements, and was keenly celebrated by the founders of Ruskin Hall, Oxford.'³

It can be a dangerous thing, being generous to others.



Who knows where it might lead? Once you begin where might it end? Oscar Wilde went on to achieve great things, including writing the essay from which the title of this short story is derived. He was also treated with evil malice. However, Oxford was changing, the country was changing, the world was changing. But why did these fine young men not do their manual work nearer to their colleges? One answer, illustrated by the map above, was that they did not need to. At that time there were public pathways through Magdalen, but, sadly no longer.

There was a bridge across the Cherwell river, not just the bridge that bore the name of Wilde's college, but dozens of other bridges, and a great many ferries as well. There was a bridge just south of St Clements church (the footings remain today), another just north of the bridge, a third at King's Mill, a fourth crossed from Magdalen School into the land between the rivers just south of Magdalen bridge. Take that route, and then the river could be crossed by two ferries into either Merton's field or Christ Church meadow. The Cherwell already had a huge number of crossings, which was why Wilde found himself digging out and laying a route for the public to use, in Hinksey.

There was another ferry just 100 yards south again, and many more north of Magdalen College allowing the public to walk across college lands. The penny-farthing had only been invented in 1871, and no one cycled. I would include more maps here, but space is limited. Don't fear, you can explore the past until your heart is content, by zooming into the wonderful interactive map that the National Library of Scotland now provides, free of charge. Via the Internet anyone can now see how the ancient rights of way cut through the colleges without having recourse to a map library.⁴ You can change the dates of the map to see when each bridge was removed – because almost all of them, eventually, were closed. Apart from Magdalen bridge itself.

When Oxford became the home of the new motor car, foot and by now some cycle bridges, the punt ferries and public access over college land were mostly consigned to the past. We too easily forget that, before the car, it was the bicycle that made Lord Nuffield his first fortune.

Along with the new cars came buses, which did for the trams that used to run through Oxford. Lord Nuffield was a cunning man and had a financial interest in the buses, but don't let's go down that dark track. Instead, let's just remember that *once* Oxford had so many bridges and ferries crossing the rivers because people mostly walked and (later) cycled to work along convenient desire lines. Local



The crossings of the Cherwell in Central Oxford, circa 1873

people continued to mostly walk or cycle in the 1960s and 1970s. The university barred students having cars in Oxford in 1968. Their cars were sometimes made by local men, almost all of whom cycled to work.

Oxford University was also changing radically in this period. In 1873, Annie Rogers won first place in Oxford's senior local exam list. Both Balliol and Worcester offered exhibitions (funding) for such an achievement, but not for a woman, because that was against the rules. Rules exist for a reason, to be changed when the time is right. Annie campaigned for open and full membership of Oxford University.



versity for women. She won the right to be awarded a university degree in 1920 and became the university's first female graduate. In 1937, on her way to an evening lecture, she was killed when hit by a lorry on St Giles'.⁵ She also has a blue plaque.

Sadly, our story now turns down a darker road. *The University was also becoming more insular.* In 1908 Kenneth Graham explained what can and cannot be said about *such matters*: 'The Mole knew well that it is quite against animal-etiquette to dwell on possible trouble ahead, or even to allude to it; so he dropped the subject.' I have not the space to detail it here and it may be thought impolite, so it may be best to drop the subject. But should you want to know why the last alternative routes were shut, the bridges closed, and one college even built a moat around its grounds in the 1980s, then turn to R. W. Johnson's account: '*Look Back in Laughter: Oxford's Postwar Golden Age.*' Published in 2015 by the one-time Bursar of Magdalen it triggers a warning for our more enlightened times today. Alongside some hurtful comments about local children in Oxford, it tells of why those public routes over college land were shut to keep the children out.'⁶

Our story twists and turns: there was some progress in more recent times. It was not always unrelenting bad news. Two new bridges, Lemond and Fignon, were built to create a new route to alleviate the harm caused by closing so many public routes through Oxford. Whoever named the bridges (around 1990) had a sense of humour: 'In 1989 Laurence Fignon, after 3,285 km of cycling and 21 stages plus a time trial, lost the Tour de France by 8 seconds to Greg LeMond. This is the smallest margin in the history of the Tour. And as the bridges are separated by an 8-second cycle ride someone had the whimsical idea of naming them after the two rivals.'⁷

On 21 April 1990 the *Oxford Mail* announced that an imminent decision was about to be made by the University's Hebdomadal Council on a new cycle track to be laid across the University Parks with a tarmacked section placed over the River Cherwell meadows.⁸



The newspaper article ended:

'Talks for a new safer route to avoid traffic congestion and the dangerous roundabout at the Plain began 13 years ago but floundered because of University objections to the use of The Parks.'

Those talks had begun in 1977. Look closely at the map and you will see that one bridge was originally planned to be set back from the other. This was so that the genitalia of the dons sunning themselves on Parsons Pleasure would not be visible to lady cyclists riding by on that bridge. In the end, nude male-only bathing was brought to an end in 1991 and the path opened with the two bridges aligned. Old Badger may not have approved, but rules exist to be changed.

And this brings us, almost up to the present day. Even in some of the University's darkest days of closing itself off, the provision of the new track was possible, and the ending of legal flashing by the equivalent of today's associate professorship was banned. However, after the routes across the colleges and rivers were cut off, new signs began to appear, almost everywhere. More and more signs instructing people to stay out, or if they come into a particular area, to then behave in a certain way. Civility was to be enforced by edict.

In 2022 cyclists expressed their displeasure at the 'ridiculous and petty' signs banning bikes in Oxford University Parks. A new sign had just been erected replacing a slightly less offensive one. Below the sign was a notice, printed upon a background of Oxford Blue, and embossed with the University Crest. It informed the reader, standing in University Parks, that 'CCTV images are being monitored and recorded for the purposes of crime prevention, detection, and public safety. This scheme is controlled by University of Oxford Security Services. For more information call 01865 272944.'



It was kind of them to provide a telephone number, one now spread far and wide by the photographs of the sign 'going viral'. Interested cyclists from around the world phoned it to ask why pushing a bike was so frowned upon. The Radio 2 presenter, Jeremy Vine, labelled the signs 'disgusting'. The cyclist who took the photograph reported: 'this has annoyed me before and it annoys me now. How petty, discriminatory and inaccessible is Oxford University that they don't even allow cycles to be pushed through Oxford University Parks? Ridiculous restriction in the so-called cycling city.'

One commentator did point out that the red circle means 'not allowed', and the bar through it means an end to that restriction, so the sign actually implies the end of a no cycling area. Another wondered what would occur were you questioned by a University security official, who presumably had been instructed to give you a sound

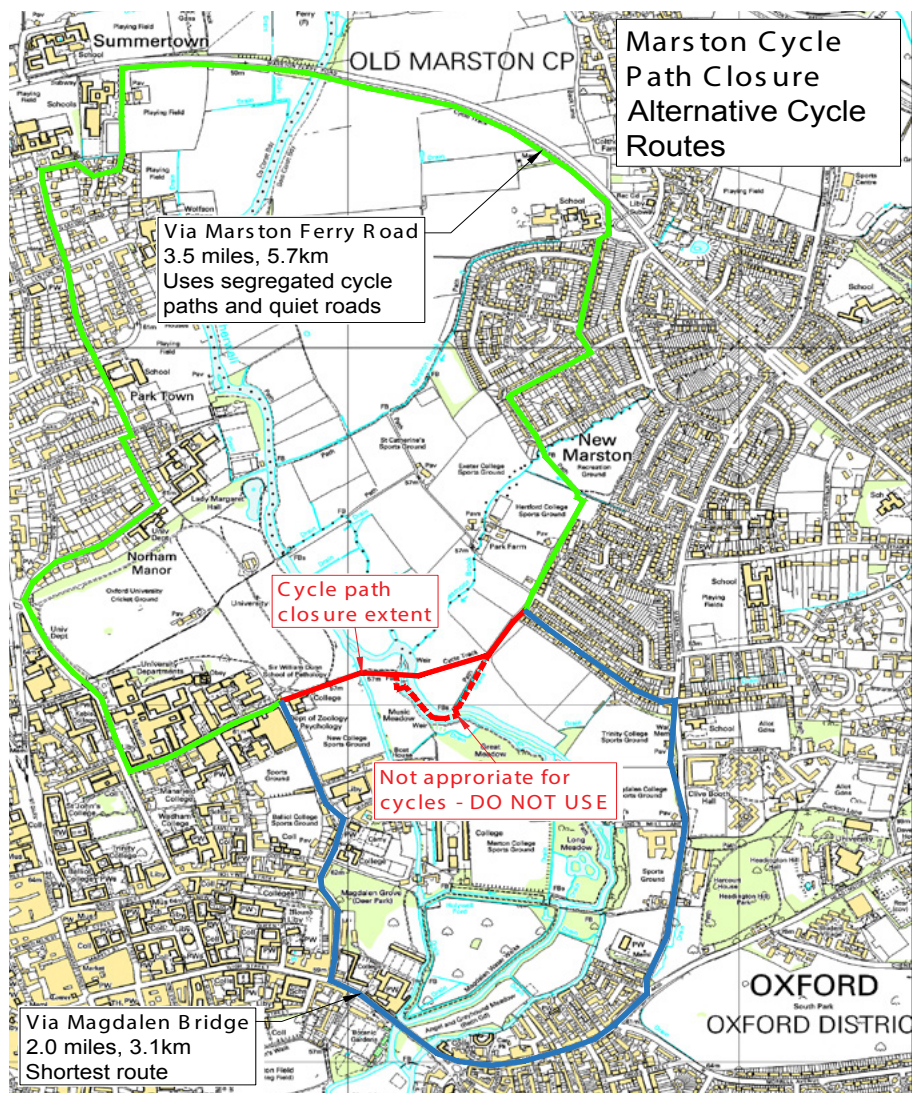
ticking off should you be found transgressing. What powers did they actually have? To look very upset?

Others did point out that there have been trials to allow cycling in the parks which apparently ‘caused pedestrians distress and it’s nice to have a space just for walkers’. One wonders if smelling salts were made available? The University Parks contain a great many paths, maybe just one could be permitted for bikes to cycle over? However, were that to happen we could no longer pretend that the parks were some oasis of Victorian tranquillity. A relic from a time before the bicycles became commonplace. Perhaps the signs should be altered to permit penny-farthings to allow the charade to continue of trying to pretend nothing ever changes?



And so it was, that nothing changed. The University Parks ban on a bike of any kind, even pushed, remained. Residents of north-east Oxford had only two routes for those who cycle into the city centre: either around St. Clement’s and the Plain and over Magdalen bridge, or along the new cycle path, into Marsh town. Anyone, including children cycling to the many schools from their homes in the South West and West of Oxford were similarly limited. And so it might have remained except that bridges age and fail and new (Swan) schools are built. Thus, many more children began to use the Lemond and Fignon bridges. But suddenly, on July 10th 2023, without warning of the timing, or public consultation, signs appeared at the bridges announcing their closure for ten weeks from mid-August.

Later, in July, a map was made available telling cyclists that whilst the bridges were closed they must either use the Plain, or take a huge detour around the Marston Ferry road; a route which is now saturated with children cycling to both the Cherwell



and Swan schools in morning and evening. The map, unsurprisingly, resulted in anger. The immediate question was: who had drawn it, why had they drawn it and who had approved such ridiculous detours?

We now know that on the 22nd of June 2021 a man with a hammer inspected Fignon bridge. He had then reported that: ‘There is wide delamination of the soffit which was hollow sounding when tapped with a hammer. A large area of the soffit concrete cover was missing and additional areas spalled off following light tapping with a hammer.’ A plan began to be made to repair the bridge *which would mean an extensive period of closure*, but no local councillors and none of the curators of the parks appeared to have been informed. Some in Oxfordshire County Council must have known, but local residents, university students, older cyclists needing a safe route, parents of school children, cycling organisations, were given no warning almost up to the

very point when work was to begin.

When the official notices appeared in summer 2023 people began to take notice and offer suggestions. One city councillor suggested that it might be possible to cycle through the red ‘not appropriate route’ (see map above) and appeared to celebrate that if that occurred, that because a gate was involved, at least life would be made harder for those who ride Deliveroo bikes: ‘so this would rule out the bulkier bikes used by Deliveroo and the like – not a bad thing.’ However, appearing to approve of anything that makes life harder for the servants who bring us our food, is not a good look. What various participants thought of others began to become more and more apparent.

And what of the University’s position? It was almost impossible to find anyone who would claim responsibility, but eventually it was revealed that: ‘The Parks Curators have been kept informed of the discussions but have not formally considered any op-

tions involving the Parks, as no alternative routes have been determined viable.’

Determined by who? I and many others asked.

Eventually, on August 1st, an FAQ (Frequently Asked Question) sheet was released by the man who had held that hammer in 2021. The FAQ was only issued to local councillors so that they could parrot some stock answers. It was not made more widely available as there was no public consultation. The FAQ suggested that there was an imminent risk to boaters, apparently. Think of the boaters! Who is thinking of the boaters? But are the boaters, on their punts, more important than local people going about their daily business? Apparently so. And thus it was deemed that something had to happen, urgently, although it was over two years since the after the bridge was tapped with a hammer.

Dead willows and the otters

The FAQ sheet was written in response to a local resident’s suggestion (made and ignored) that a pontoon

bridge could have been placed just south of Lemond Bridge to land on Mesopotamia in an area of scrub with no trees affected. Apparently every tree, unlike every child, is sacred. Those installing the pontoon bridge would have to be wary of the dead willow, one which by August 2023 had been unsafe for many months with a heavy branch hanging by a slender sliver of wood. The dead tree was clearly just as dangerous to boaters as the decaying concrete under the Fignon bridge. Neither the University, Environment Agency (the successor to the National Rivers Authority) or the County Council had shown any interest in dealing with the dead willow.

Advice from the City Council’s Wildlife Officer mentioned otter sightings, stating that providing that the lower arm of the river along Mesopotamia was kept clear and free for wildlife, then the threat to otters in and around Parsons Pleasure would be alleviated. No otter nests had been found within 150 meters of the bridge work (which could have been a serious constraint on the way the works were handled). So wildlife threat was not a good reason for not building a temporary pontoon bridge. The temporary route would lead straight onto the bridge into Music Meadow from Mesopotamia.

Marston Cycle Path FAQs: Why are the works being done?

Neither of the bridges has received significant maintenance since the cycle path was first constructed in the early 1990s.

The steel reinforcement in the deck of Fignon Cycle Bridge has corroded, weakening the deck and causing areas of concrete on the underside of the bridge to become loose. These areas of concrete could pose a risk to boaters. Loose concrete has been removed from the deck, but the deck will continue to deteriorate unless it is replaced.

The timber parapets and decking on Lemond Cycle Bridge are already rotten in places and are beyond their intended service life. Parts of the deck were found to be in poor condition last year and were replaced at short notice, causing considerable disruption. Full refurbishment of the bridge is required to avoid future short notice emergency closures and safeguard the ongoing use of the cycle path in the future.

Why is the cycle path closed during the work?

The decks of both bridges will be removed and replaced as part of the works rendering the bridges impassable. The bridges are not wide enough to allow for phased working which was adopted when refurbishing Holywell Cycle Bridge further along the cycle path a few years ago.

Why are the works taking so long?

New timber elements on Lemond Cycle Bridge need to be cut to precise lengths by skilled carpenters, and the arched shape of the bridge means it is not possible to prepare all of the timber elements in advance of refurbishment. We are replacing the existing timber elements with very high durability timber. This timber will last for decades, but

can be more difficult to work with than softer timbers, taking more time.

Fignon Cycle Bridge is a listed structure due to it being the first bridge of its kind in the UK. Considerable care is required during refurbishment to prevent damage to its post tensioned arched beams.

Both bridges will be refurbished concurrently to reduce the duration of the closure, and we will open the cycle path as soon as possible if the refurbishment works are quicker than anticipated.

What are the alternative cycle routes?

There are two alternative cycle routes between Marston and the City Centre, (shown on the attached map):

- via Magdalen Bridge
- via Marston Ferry Road

The route via Magdalen Bridge is the shortest option, but those preferring to use quiet roads and segregated cycle paths may prefer the longer route Via Marston Ferry Road.

What are the alternative pedestrian route?

Mesopotamia Walk and the route through University Parks via High Bridge will remain open to pedestrians during daytime hours as usual. These routes do not have appropriate lighting and will be closed at night as usual, with gates being locked. Outside daylight hours, the shortest pedestrian route is via Magdalen Bridge.

Can cyclists use Mesopotamia Walk or University Parks as an alternative route?

As usual cyclists will not be allowed to use these routes,

whether dismounted or not. These routes are not deemed appropriate for cyclists and their use by cyclists puts pedestrians at considerable risk. Signage will be in place asking cyclists not to use Mesopotamia Way and we urge cyclists to obey these signs to allow pedestrians to use these routes safely.

Why hasn't a shorter alternative cycle route been provided?

OCC [Oxfordshire County Council] have liaised with the University whilst planning the works. Alternative routes utilising existing river crossings e.g. High Bridge, Addison's Walk, Mesopotamia Way are not appropriate for cyclists whether dismounted or not. All of these routes go through land owned by the University or Colleges which have general bans on cyclists. The University and Colleges have not given permission for these bans to be relaxed or these routes to be used. Even if permission was granted, their use by cyclists would introduce significant risk to pedestrians and are not appropriate for cyclists due to the presence of steps, very steep ramps and are narrow.

Why hasn't a temporary crossing be provided?

A number of people have proposed that a temporary crossing could be provided to the upper Cherwell, adjacent to Lemond bridge aligned with Meadow bridge over the Lower Cherwell. Either a pontoon bridge or a scaffold bridge. Neither of these options has been investigated in any detail as neither is deemed viable.

Pontoon Bridge

- Otters are present in the Upper Cherwell (and Lower Cherwell) and are protected by Law. Provision of a pontoon bridge would block the full width would not be permitted by Natural England. Our contractor's work pontoons are limited to approximately 4m wide in channels that are approximately 20m and 15m wide.
- Pontoons rely on buoyancy to support their loads. Under a foreseeable range of loads (a single person to a crowd of people), and with natural variations in watercourse level, the deck level of a pontoon bridge may foreseeably vary by, say, 700mm over the duration of the scheme. Articulated transition ramps would be re-

quired to account for this variation in loading and it is difficult to see how these could be constructed robustly enough in the space available without very significant cost.

- In order to get permission from the Environment Agency, any pontoon bridge installed would need to be removable at short notice following a Flood Warning. It is difficult to see how this could be done with a bridge which was sufficiently robust to be open to the public.

Scaffold Bridge

- The Upper Cherwell at this location is approximately 25m wide. A scaffold bridge capable of spanning this, subjected to crowd loads would need to be approximately 1.5m deep from deck to soffit (underside). This is a very significant structure and it is not clear that it could be constructed in the space available.
- The soffit of the bridge would need to be at least 300mm above the banks of the Cherwell to get permission from the Environment Agency. The deck of the scaffold bridge would therefore be approximately 1.8m above the approaches. To be accessible ramps would need to be provided either side. Ramps on cycle ways should have a maximum gradient of 1 in 20. This could possibly be increased to 1 in 12. Even with the maximum allowable ramp gradient 20m ramps would be required either side of the bridge. There is not sufficient space to provide such a ramp on Mesopotamia Walk, before Meadow bridge, and such a ramp would not be permitted in the New Marston Meadows SSSI.

Either type of bridge would require a number of trees to be removed and installation of a temporary cycle path on the New Marston Meadows SSSI and through Music Meadow. It may be possible to remove trees and get permission from Natural England for a temporary cycle path on the SSSI but it is not likely that this would be permitted given that there are established alternative routes available.

A temporary crossing has not been investigated in any detail as it is clear that it is not viable from an initial review, but it is very likely that additional problems would present themselves if these were investigated further.

BEN DODDS

Principal Engineer | Oxfordshire Highways
Milestone Infrastructure

Companies that provide temporary pontoon bridges specifically state that their bridges can be suitable for mass gatherings such as festivals. They can deal with large crowds and heavy loads.

A suspicion grew that the project manager for the bridge renovations working in County Hall but employed by Milestone Infrastructure, through an out-sourcing contract with the local authority, had not thought through any of the problems or alternative options that could arise from closure of the bridges for an extended period. Almost inevitably, a commercial company puts profit above

public utility. It seems that this has happened here. The project manager had a desk in County Hall, but when asked by a member of the public whether he was a local government officer he categorically denied this, saying that he worked for the private sector.

Oscar Wilde might have a thing or three to say about Milestone Infrastructure and this behaviour. Thinking this through, and coming up with a sensible and safe way of dealing with disrupted cycle traffic, would have been harder work. It was what this private company's employee was saying which resulted in the University ad-

ministrators claiming: ‘no alternative routes have been determined viable.’ The buck, it turned out, stopped with the project manager, who was also the man with the hammer in June 2021. Or did it?

On Friday 18 August 2023 the cyclists of Oxford added their voice to the clamour from local parents, as well as those concerned that elderly cyclists were also being directed to the Plain. The cyclists were concerned by a ‘too long and too dangerous’ diversion as the cycle path was closed. They were upset upon learning that ‘Oxfordshire County Council says it had “no choice” but to close the route for bridge repairs, but some have questioned why a “safe” diversion has not been directed through University Parks, with it instead visiting a notoriously dangerous roundabout...’

The cyclists reported that the most damning of English words had been invoked and someone was – I almost dare not write the word for fear of shocking you (trigger warning) – ‘disappointed.’ A city councillor invoked this damning condemnation: ‘I’m very disappointed that, after six weeks of discussions with the university, county council and local residents we have been unable to find a safe alternative route across Marston Meadows’.

Things became a little heated. Who was it that had acted on the man with the hammer’s advice? Were they willing to stand by it should a child die on the Plain on their way to school? That was the obvious implication of all the questions being asked. The atmosphere became a little unpleasant, but fear not, loyal reader, for here our story finally begins to take a turn for the better.

Committees don’t sit over the summer, someone, somewhere made a decision all by themselves to do the right

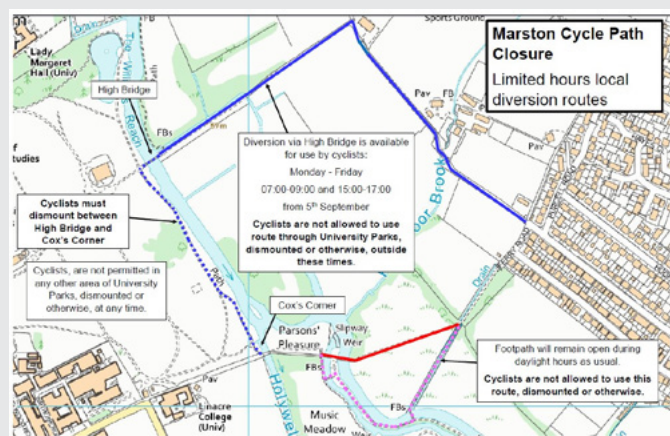
thing (or a small group of someones). Or, to be more truthful, to make the smallest of possible concessions when the heat of this somewhat tortured tale, became too hard to bear. Someone realized that it is the University of the city, not that the city exists to serve the University. And that anonymous someone gave permission for Andrew Gant of the County Council and Alexander Betts of the University to issue a joint statement. Thus it came to be, that exactly a month after the FAQ had been issued, and within days of the schools opening, on the 1st of September 2023, Oxfordshire County Council issued an official notice, on their website. And a new word entered the lexicon of instructions in this tangled tale, a softer word: ‘urged’ – see if you can spot it in the text of the statement below.

One councillor reported: ‘The University reserved the right to pull this diversion if it’s not working, if we can’t get the marshals (or, unlikely, it’s not used). So people are encouraged to volunteer’. This was accompanied with messages such as ‘will hopefully be a jolly experience for those who take part.’

Why were marshals needed? Why were cyclist being *urged* not to use the now pink dashed route (formally red) on the map below?

Apparently it was because ‘the river banks are very unstable and risked people falling off them into the river as they are not very wide’. My chair is named after a man who once climbed a mountain. It was time I manned up. I knew my duty and so got out on my bike and cycled the pink route. In the spirit of past great explorers entering lands without the appropriate permission, I set forth on my bike.

Additional route made available for cyclists during Marston cycle path closure:



Cyclists will be able to push their bicycles along a local diversion route through University Parks via High Bridge during school commuting hours, while Marston cycle path in Oxford is closed for bridge refurbishment works,

The additional diversion route has been agreed following extensive liaison between Oxfordshire County Council, the University of Oxford, and Oxford City Council.

Cyclists may dismount and walk their bikes through University Parks between High Bridge – often known locally as Rainbow Bridge – and Cox’s Corner, in the south-east corner of the park.

The local diversion will be made available to dismounted cyclists during school commuting hours – 7am

- 9am and 3pm - 5pm, Mondays to Fridays. This route will be in place from Tuesday 5 September when schools return.

Outside these hours, cyclists will not be permitted within University Parks whether dismounted or otherwise.

Dismounted cyclists will only be able to use the designated route, which will be marshalled by volunteers during the hours of operation. Cyclists will not be permitted in other areas of University Parks at any other time.

The route is intended primarily for use by school children, but all members of the public are welcome to use it during the periods when marshals are present.

Marston cycle path has been closed since 14 August when Oxfordshire County Council began essential refurbishment work to Lemond and Fignon cycle bridges. Work is progressing as planned and the closure is estimated to last until 23 October.

Councillor Andrew Gant, Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet Member for Highway Management, said:

“It’s excellent news that a solution has been found to make it safer for cyclists, especially schoolchildren, to continue to be able to use their bikes while Marston cycle path is closed for essential repairs.”

Professor Alexander Betts, University of Oxford’s Local and Global Engagement Officer, said:

‘We are delighted that the university and the councils have been

able to work together to find a practical solution, It's important that we support school children and other vulnerable cyclists to be able to get around our city safely,

'We've tried to balance this against respecting University Parks' no-cycling rules, which we know are incredibly important for the many pedestrians who use the Parks,'

These arrangements will be reviewed after two weeks, to assess usage and compliance with conditions,

Outside school commuting hours, alternative cycle routes are available via Magdalen Bridge, which is the

shortest route, and via Marston Ferry Road which uses quiet roads and segregated cycle paths,

Mesopotamia Walk will remain open to pedestrians during daylight hours as usual. This route is not appropriate for bikes and cyclists are urged not to use it.

The council leases Marston cycle path and the two bridges from owners the University of Oxford. Under this agreement, the council is responsible for the maintenance of the bridges and the work is being carried in agreement with the university. Anyone wishing to volunteer their services as a marshal can fill in the forms online.

Geographers, of which I am one, have years of training as regards rivers. I have endured the most terrible of horsefly bites while standing still holding a measuring rod in rivers in more than one country. I am, amongst much else, something of an expert on river banks. And I can report that the river banks are not unstable, that you are a very long way away from the river when cycling on the route, and that you would have to try extremely hard to fall into the river. If you are interested in doing that (falling in) then cycle along the cycle path next to Oxford canal, you will find yourself much nearer to water and in much greater danger of falling in. Here, I am not suggesting preventing cyclists from using the canal path, just take it extremely carefully and slowly. And if you want a narrow cycle path – there are many in Oxfordshire far narrower than this that are shared by both bikes and people. But it is the contractors to the county, employed by Milestone who are the ultimate authority on river banks in the city of Oxford today.

The ultimate ownership of Milestone appears to be vested in French private finance multi-millionaires. This company had been sub-contracted by Oxfordshire County Council to carry out their responsibilities, just as the University has in effect, subcontracted its responsibility to ensure a safe well-maintained set of paths into Oxford to the County Council, while retaining ownership of the land. Everyone thought they could sub-contract their responsibilities away. And so the man with the hammer ended up taking the heat. A colleague wrote to me 'Maybe I haven't misunderstood this, but sometimes I am ashamed to be part of this university.'

But this story ends well, the marshals appeared, enter the Oxford yellow vests. Sporting their best gilets jaunes (blanche and orange for two stylist dissenters). Five marshals appeared on the first day, and maybe another five on the second. The last time I pushed my cycle along the new Oxford blue route (map above) I only counted two marshals – but let's not tell the University that. It can be our little secret. On 19th September, following a meeting of the Parks authorities, marshals and councillors, a decision was made to extend the time for using the alternative cycle route through the Parks by half an hour. More importantly, the Park authorities are engaging with

others.

I guess the marshals were required to maintain the Victorian ambiance of the parks – a Victorian park comes with Victorian style marshalling and Victorian attitudes. Someone somewhere really wanted to get the children to get off their bikes and pushing them – even if the alternative is to cycle round the Plain; which becomes a faster route once you require the children to push their bikes through the Parks.

I decided that I would rather not know who that person was, so did not ask.

Previously I had sent hundreds of emails over the summer to try to determine who was responsible, and then plead with them to take action. I was far from alone, I had a vested interest. My nephew cycles that route to school. My youngest son cycles it to serve wine and carry plates of food in the evenings at a college, his only alternative would be the Plain.

In some of the replies I received I detected something I had felt before, as an Oxford child, and later on first arriving back in Oxford over a decade ago but never had the language to describe. I have that language now: The Oxford sneer – the curled upper lip – the sneer has a particular quality to it in this place. It may be subconscious, but it occurs in written communication as much as being a facial feature you might find hard to control. It is less useful, less attractive, and far less well known than the Oxford comma. But it definitely exists. Those who claimed an alternative route for cyclist was needed won out, despite others sneering that none of this was needed. I asked questions (by email) that revealed just how little they knew of the city they lived in. I kept the emails. I always do.

On the 14th of September 2023, former city councillor Roy Darke, one of the most effective campaigners to ensure that the University was not too stupid, had a letter published in the *Oxford Times*. Its text reminded me of Utopian stories of successful urban design in which the old will look out on children playing, with parades of perambulators being pushed by, young men and women passing merrily, alongside the cycling old maids on their way to evening mass in the autumn mist, and those in wheelchairs also well accommodated. But it also offered up a new vision, or rather a modern vision, of what we once had long before any of us were alive, and how we might win that back again – more active travel routes across the rivers and into city:

'It is with pleasure that I sit eating breakfast on Edgeway Road and see youngsters (and others) cycling safely in and out of town on the safe 'alternative route' whilst the bridges are renovated. But let's not be too complacent or sycophantic about this tempo-



rary reprieve from the fatal and only alternative route offered for cyclists by the County Council. Requiring 11-year-olds to cycle to school via The Plain was downright irresponsible and showed open neglect of public duty and a lack of spirit and imagination.

The University and local authorities should more openly take joint responsibility for making Oxford a safer and more equal place. A safe city means looking to create more vehicle free routes for cyclists and pedestrians. A series of Calatrava-style cycle bridges across Magdalen (Addison's Walk), Christchurch Meadow (linking to Meadow Lane), through LMH etc. would add enormously to cycle safety and excite the aesthetic scene in this inspirational city.'

There are many different Calatrava style cycle bridges to be seen all around the world. Most are short and subtle, but some are large enough to span the Thames and allow shipping to pass. One is shown here. We are a long way behind the Dutch (in so many ways, including, when it comes to travel), but there are many ways in which new bridges can be built. As well as new platforms across meadows, over steps, and through Fellows' Gardens.



Like Newcastle and Gateshead have now across the Tyne, and Oxford once had, there should be again seven bridges, cycle and foot, across the river Cherwell. We should have so many ways to cycle that when one route needs to be repaired it causes no problems. Far better to donate money for a bridge to save lives, than for yet another university building that doesn't. The many colleges that border the river could all have a bridge for cycles and walkers, or make the existing ones open. Since I have returned to Oxford in 2013 the only new bridges that have been built were two, both built to ensure that students (unlike Oscar Wilde) would not have to mix with the public.

If you don't know by now, why all this has to change, and why this is not the end but only the beginning of a story, then think of what happens when everything changes, forever, with no trigger warning. Don't think of the child necessarily, or of the old lady who gained the first degree cycling across St Giles, on her way to an evening lecture. Don't think of the mother of two, or the husband, wife, boyfriend or girlfriend. And don't necessarily think of those school children. Instead think of their parents, their friends, their siblings (like me), and their children, their partners, those who live with what happened for the rest of their lives; and – if you can, think also of the drivers. When a car, or bus, van, or lorry hits a cyclist hard – without any trigger warning – everything changes, forever.

On the 28th of April this year the BBC ran a story featuring Ling Felce who was killed when she was hit by a lorry on 1st March 2022 on the Plain. The story was about how just one extra incremental change was being made to the design of Oxford's still most dangerous roundabout. Lorries were to be banned from loading and unloading goods between 7am and 10am and 4.30pm and 7pm on or by the Plain. But what happens outside of those hours? What will happen when the next University scientist dies on the roundabout?

Ling Felce's husband has spoken out, including to the BBC, about thinking of the family of the vehicle drivers – which is very admirable and something rarely seen in public.



The County Council, as the democratic planning authority, needs to establish a review group to reassess cycling in the city. Its aim should be to ensure no road deaths of cyclists, of pedestrians, of drivers or passengers (vision zero) and that far fewer are injured every year. The colleges, the University, the city and county local authorities need to work together to establish safe connections between all the University's sites, the city's schools and homes. The University itself should employ a cycling expert to coordinate action for safer cycling throughout the collegiate university, and to work closely with the local authorities so that the university, and especially the colleges, are helpful – rather than being a hindrance.

Finally, the Cycle Track and Mesopotamia are always closed on 25 December and 1 January. Do we really want to increase the chances of a death on the Plain on Christmas Day because we are so scared of re-establishing what was once a nearby right of way?

¹ http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/streets/ghost_signs/breweries.html

² <http://openplaques.org/plaques/3780>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ruskin

⁴ <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/side-by-side/>

⁵ <http://www.oxonblueplaques.org.uk/plaques/rogers.html>

⁶ http://www.threshold-press.co.uk/memoir/r_w_j_laughter.php

⁷ <https://www.cyclox.org/index.php/2023/09/07/cycle-path-diversion-through-university-parks/>

⁸ https://www.headington.org.uk/maps_transport/cycling.htm

⁹ <https://docs.planning.org.uk/20230220/8/RPQATDMF1BN00/fz1y1oy4yo0so53k.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://road.cc/content/news/cyclists-concerned-dangerous-diversion-303347>

¹¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20230903095124/https://news.oxford->

shire.gov.uk/additional-route-made-available-for-cyclists-during-marston-cycle-path-closure/

¹² <https://inhabitat.com/arching-melkwegbridge-routes-pedestrians-cyclists-across-a-canal-in-the-netherlands/>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-65423191>

¹⁴ <https://www.roadpeace.org/prevention/>

Danny Dorling is a patron of RoadPeace, the national charity for road crash victims in the UK, and the brother of Benjamin Dorling (1971-1989), who was killed by a car when cycling on his bike, coming home, in Oxford.

How to initiate Congregation actions

How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22nd day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8th day before the meeting.

Questions and replies

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18th day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

Postal votes

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present (“on the floor”) at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6th day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

Flysheets

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>

Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.

The Congregation website is at: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk).

Notes from Ivory flats

ROBERT FOLEY

The great university subsidy scandal

Being a *Guardian* reader, I don't know if the *Telegraph* still gets letters from 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells', but if they did, I might write one myself.

Dear Sir,

I am appalled to discover that universities, well known as the home of the work-shy as well as students, are luxuriating in endless rounds of subsidies, while we hard-working pensioners struggle to find the money for the second G & T.

Yours truly,

DoTW

Horror of horrors – creeping socialism, pampered academics, and so on and so forth. But of course, universities are subsidised in the sense that they receive financial support from the Government, as of course they should. Yet, there is indeed an unknown form of subsidy in the system – the extent to which universities are subsidised by their own academic staff. This is the great University scandal that I have in mind.

Let me count the ways. I can start with something relatively small and trivial – mobile phones. It is my understanding (alright, suspicion) that in the administration there are quite a number of University mobile phones, phones paid for by the University to be used for official business. I am sure that these are completely necessary as so much work must, these days, be carried out by mobile, not to mention monitoring emails and finding information. But I have yet to come across an academic who has a University phone. Perhaps, this is because they don't do any University business? Of course they do, but there is what should probably be called unconscious bias involved in this. We talk to colleagues (all over the world) about research, about collaborations, about teaching and ideas, about students. We double-factor identify ourselves using our personal phones when logging in to University admin websites to write student reports, etc. Actually we double-factor identify ourselves endlessly. But somehow, despite the fact that the University is, as they say, a place of education and research, this does not really count as 'university business'. Presumably this is a vestige of the idea that, at heart, we do this stuff (research and teaching) because we enjoy it, and so should be quite happy to pay for the privilege. Subsidy one....

Keeping in the digital world, let's move on to WFH – working from home. In this case academics have been world pioneers, having worked from home long before it became fashionable. There are many reasons for that, from those who want to get some work done to those who do not. Many has been the departmental secretary who has had to tell some long-suffering student that they haven't seen Dr Bloggs for weeks. But now WFH is an acceptable mode of operation for most staff. There is clearly the expectation that digital contact is maintained, and

equally, that the resources to work efficiently are at home. This means good quality internet and wi-fi access, camera, microphone, etc., and this comes at a cost. My wife is also an academic, and although we have never calculated it, my guess is that most of our internet usage is related to work (how sad!). But we can add this to the list. Indeed, I seem to remember getting advice about the types of desks, chairs and screens I needed to work safely at home (danger money?), but no mention that the University might pay for it. Subsidy two.

These are what might be considered hidden subsidies, as there is no observable cash involved. However, there are some where real hard dosh is involved. Except for those of us who are not, we are a sociable bunch on the whole, and food and drink are the lubricants of ideas, of writing papers, of discussing the wonders or horrors of the last seminar, and bringing students and academics together as part of the process of both being inclusive and encouraging young people. After a seminar, visiting speakers are taken to pubs and dinners. In any other profession these would be business expenses, but in universities, while it is possible to claim for the speaker (who, in my experience, often finds the hassle of reclaiming expenses too great!), the others dutifully throw their debit cards into the hat, and often the more senior people pay for any students there. External examiners, who are paid a pittance for two or three days work and travel, are usually pleased to anoint with alcohol the heads of the happy student after the viva (while the supervisor may have bought a bottle of brandy for the less happy ones). We travel to conferences (almost certainly at some cost to ourselves even if there are some funds available) and there is no doubt that the lunches and dinners (breakfasts as well if you are in the USA) are places where serious work gets done. I exaggerate, of course, because this is not universal, and Vice-Chancellors scraping a living, do get an entertainment allowance. I should perhaps declare a conflict of interest here, as Oxbridge colleges do subsidise some of these activities, perhaps wisely recognising their importance, but this is a luxury only possible outside formal University structures. Anyway, subsidy three.

Larger if less permanent subsidies occur for those who do fieldwork. Getting an institutional credit card is generally harder than the UK getting a vote in the Eurovision song contest, so most expenditure is racked up on personal accounts, and then reimbursed. This can soon mount up to thousands of pounds, something that few can afford, and reimbursement can take months. Imagine a lab director paying for all their reagents on their credit cards, and waiting to be paid back – that is the lot of the fieldworker. Subsidy four.

Then there are the subsidies at either end of the academic career. At the starting end, more and more of the small class teaching (seminars, tutorials, supervisions) are done by PhD students, not the best remunerated groups, or by those who have recently finished doctorates and

are on the hunt for their first step on the academic ladder. These are all either actual or virtual zero-hour contracts, which in effect means that the poorest of our community are subsidising the University. This is partly due to the fact that the pay is for the contact hours only, not including the time it takes to prepare and assess work (always more from those starting), and partly as there are none of the additional costs an employer would pay to a real employee – sickness benefit, parental leave, holiday pay, national insurance. At the other end of the scale, I am sure I am not alone in having retired and then asked to come back and lecture, mark exams, etc. While this is not the same level of exploitation as for the early career researchers, it does testify to the fact that the University academic body is understaffed, and so yet another way in which the silent subsidies operate. Subsidy five.

And now we come to the one that puts all the others into the shade – the number of hours necessary for an academic to do their work. I have despaired about this before, but largely in terms of stress, morale and the work-life balance, but there are also financial elements to consider. While it is true – as far as I know – that contracts for academics do not specify the number of hours ('just get the work done, there's a good chap'), there are realistic expectations. Working weeks vary across Europe, from 32.2 in the Netherlands to 40 in Greece, and across sectors, with agriculture, forestry and fishing industries topping the list at 41.8 hours¹. Lawyers, bankers and junior doctors are likely to push these numbers up, although some – but not junior doctors – are well remunerated for it. Full time contracts for non-academic staff are usually around 36 hours per week. But most academics work far more hours than this – evenings and weekends are seldom work-free, and I suspect that many if not most do not take their full holiday entitlement. While people might say, they are choosing to work because they find Sanskrit inscriptions or coding in Python so fascinating, that is irrelevant, as research is a core part of the job.... a bit like saying that accountants aren't really working because they like spreadsheets.

The outcome is that Universities are getting far more for their buck than they deserve. Essentially, universities are receiving a Rolls Royce service for the price of a second hand Ford Mondeo. So let us play some fantasy models. Let us say that between the extra hours over 36 a week (15 perhaps, far less than the not unreasonable 100 hours a week of Mary Beard) and a week's holiday not taken, academics are doing about 40% more work than they are being paid for. Take into account that salaries are some 20% down in real terms compared to 2008, then universities are getting about 50% of their academic labour for free. What ruthless business wouldn't dream for this level of subsidy – it makes Amazon look like model employers. Alright, that hardly makes it as even a back of the envelope calculation, but at half that level it does amount to a whopping subsidy. Number six.

To be fair, responsibility for much of this does not lie with The University, for it (generically) is constrained in many ways by levels of Government funding and rules governing fees, but at the sharp end it feels the same. In small and large ways, the academic staff on whom all universities depend for their core activities of teaching and research are subsidising their institutions very substantially, mostly invisibly and largely unrecognised.

As an evolutionary biologist, I spend much of my time trying to estimate the costs of adaptations – a large brain

brings many benefits, but the costs in terms of energy, metabolism, and parental care are enormous. Flight is wonderful, but the costs come in terms of brittle bones to reduce weight. Searching for hidden costs is second nature. As I have said in previous *Notes* from Ivory Flats, much of the progress and many of the changes in universities in the last decade have been borne by the hidden costs for the academic staff. The ones I have discussed previously are often intangible and relate to job satisfaction and morale, but these are real economic ones that affect not just the individuals currently in employment (and on strike), but also the ability of universities to recruit. Quiet resignations, real resignations and non-applications are on the rise.

Universities are not the ultimate driver of this situation, and they themselves are victims of a prolonged period of government cuts, and so they end up trapped between a rock and a soft place (us). However, the loss of a shared experience between management and the academic staff has meant that what should be seen as a common problem is easily escalated into 'them and us'.

If 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells' has read this far, they would probably be happily saying that this shows academics simply aren't the clever clogs they think they are. Perhaps they are right.

In the meantime, I must go and negotiate my fee with the editors of the *Oxford Magazine*.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Hours_of_work_-_annual_statistics#How_does_the_average_working_week_vary_across_economic_activities_and_occupations.3F

Titles matter- lessons from Cambridge

G.R.EVANS

Cambridge, like Oxford, preserves in a modified form its medieval legacy of democratic academic governance. That now survives in the hands of Regent House and Congregation respectively. Their members are no longer exclusively academics but a fundamental sense of the equality of those with the franchise remains strong. When in 1908 Francis Cornford, then a Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, published his *Microcosmographia Academica*¹ as a brief satirical guide on how to flourish as a university politician, his premise was that even the youngest could take an active part in events. Then as now 'twenty independent persons.... constitute a most effective check upon the rashness of individuals'. It remains the case that a Vice-Chancellor has no more than a single vote in the decision-making of the Regent House or Congregation as the University's governing body.

Senior 'leadership'

Does such a university benefit from allowing forms of 'leadership' to emerge? Cambridge's experience regarding changing categorisations of leadership pattern is more openly available for examination than Oxford's. Cambridge's *Statutes and Ordinances* mention only degree courses on the subject of leadership. They have nothing to say about practical 'leadership' of the University itself. Yet the term has gradually come into use.

A Notice on the appointment of three new Pro-Vice-Chancellors in September 2014 placed a strong emphasis on teamwork among the P-V-Cs, speaking of a 'Senior Leadership Team'.² Two years later, on the appointment of a replacement P-V-C, it was explained that the role of the 'team' was to support the Vice-Chancellor in providing 'institutional leadership' to the University. This sketched a larger 'team', explaining that the P-V-Cs worked closely in providing this leadership with 'the Heads of Schools, the Registry, and the Registry's senior colleagues'.³ In June 2017 the annual *Report on Allocations from the Chest* mentioned 'changes in the University's senior leadership' as costing £0.9m.⁴ The following year's *Allocations Report* assembled a larger 'leadership team', including some members of the Unified Administrative Service, while the UAS has its own Senior Leadership Team.⁵

Since 2020 the term 'Senior Leadership Team' has been used with increasing confidence, though still with limited clarity of definition or consistency about membership:

'For the purpose of risk management the senior leadership team is defined as the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro-Vice-Chancellors, the Heads of the Schools, the Registry, the Chief Financial Officer, the Director of Communications and the Director of Development and Alumni Relations,

...with a footnote allowing it to include non-holders of University Offices:

*'The phrase 'senior leadership team' is commonly used where a reference to 'the officers' might have been used in the past; it refers to those in senior positions, whether they hold offices or not. The membership of the senior leadership team being referred to will vary depending on the context.'*⁶

From 'civil service' to 'management'

Meanwhile there are two areas where 'management' has become important. One is the process of gradual replacement of the term 'administration' by 'management' among the academic-related staff. The other is the introduction of written employment contracts and the consequent line management of academics.

The University's Unified Administrative Service came into being in 1996,⁷ though this centralised provision still left outside it many administrators serving in Faculties and Departments. Administration was seen at the time as essentially a 'civil service', whose members might enjoy the power and influence of a Sir Humphrey. Even when the UAS was divided into Divisions reporting to the Registry in 2001,⁸ there was no notion of the activities of its members or of the UAS itself being seen as 'managerial' except with reference to its own internal hierarchical line management arrangements. But now, for example, Human Resources gives many of its own staff the title of 'manager' and includes extensive provision for training in 'leadership and management' under 'personal and professional development'.⁹ This training covers a 'range of programmes available for line managers through to those in senior leadership roles'.¹⁰ Though it is still called an 'administrative service' the UAS now has a mix of academic-related posts whose current holders have titles including the word 'manager', with some called 'Directors' and there has been a decisive shift towards speaking of 'Professional Services', with a Professional Services Conference planned for January 2024.

'Line-management' of academics

Academics were formerly not line managed as long as the normative appointment was to a University Teaching Office. It was pointed out in Discussion on 21 October, 2003,¹¹ that the University's Statutes and Ordinances required only that a University Officer should be admitted to office simply 'by subscribing, in a book kept at the Registry, a declaration that the officer will well and faithfully discharge all the duties of the office, and by entering in the book the date of entering upon the office'.¹² However, during the succeeding decades there has been an increasing pattern of appointment of academics to non-estab-

lished posts who cannot 'enter office' in that way but are subject to a range of types of contract, with all types of academic contract now referring to 'line managers'.¹³

Line management of academics began to be introduced two decades ago with the first written employment contracts. The underlying policy-change was noted in the *Annual Report of the Council* for 1998-9, with reference to the role of the Head of Institution and the associated need for 'clarification of the University's internal line management arrangements'.¹⁴ A *Report on the Management of the University Centre* advocating 'the direct line management solution' prompted concerns in Discussion on 5 December, 2000. In that case, it was argued, if the University was to be run hierarchically in that way, why bother 'with all these Committees', or with Boards or Syndicates, the University's traditional vehicles of its democratic academic governance?¹⁵ On 30 April 2002 a Discussion was held on a Topic of Concern on 'the failure to allow a Discussion at the outset of the then planned radical changes to the Governance of the University'. One speaker called for 'a system of line management of the type found in modern business, where the administrator at each level accepts clearly defined responsibilities and is held to them' but did not see this as desirable for line-management of academics.¹⁶ In July 2002 appeared a *Joint Report of the Council and the General Board, on the changes required in the University's current employment practices as a result of the European Community Directive on Fixed Term Working*.¹⁷ When that was Discussed it was suggested that introducing line-management could expose employees to control by managers who had little understanding of their work.

A *Report of the General Board* for 2017-8 reflected changed assumptions. It described the development of 'academic career pathways'. These would require line manager education, with 'a professional line management training programme' now 'under development in consultation with institutions, with streams for both academic and professional roles'.¹⁸ From 2019 Human Resources offered 'leadership' courses for 'all managers and leaders' with some especially for 'academic and research leaders'.¹⁹

Progress along the academic career 'pathways' was to be open, with some exceptions, both to University officers and the growing proportion of 'unestablished' academic postholders. Whether on the teaching-and-research or the teaching-and-scholarship (teaching-only) pathway introduced from 2021,²⁰ much depended on a Head of Institution having the powers and responsibilities of a *de facto* line manager.²¹ Indeed among senior 'academic role profiles' there were frequent mentions of 'management responsibilities', specifically including 'line management'. A Professor, whether unestablished or a University Teaching Officer, was expected to 'undertake formal staff review and development processes, manage staff welfare issues, identify training and development needs of an individual or team, undertake formal performance management for individuals as required'.²²

Cambridge's Review of the future of its EJRA²³ has just begun with two Town Hall meetings in September. If it leads in due course to abolition of enforced retirement of University Officers at 67 line management may become a stronger expectation, as it already is for the unestablished academic postholders who are not subject to the EJRA.

Training for 'leadership' and 'management'

The present listed courses and 'training' opportunities for managerial 'personal development' do not, however, map tidily or with any consistency onto the listed needs. A *Strategic Development Programme for Senior Administrators* promised 'a blend of theory and practical learning sessions, interwoven with the strategy and governance context of the University and delivered through five sessions'.²⁴ This is listed as having been offered only on 22 February 2022.

'Leadership' training offered five one-hour sessions between January and March 2023, on 'Research funding essentials', 'Managing the Estate', 'Navigating the immigration landscape in a Brexit world', 'Finance for Heads of Institution', 'Fundraising and philanthropy'.²⁵ The session on *Finance for Heads of Institution* on 14 March 2023, on Zoom, was led by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Strategy and Planning. It promised to cover 'key information required for Heads of Institution with regard to finance', namely 'University financials'; 'planning, budgeting and investment decision making'; 'key Financial Regulations and operational procedures'; 'the Enhanced Financial Transparency project' and 'where to go for help and support'. The session would be recorded and 'details' would 'follow after the session'. Its 'target audience' was Heads of Institution, deputy Heads, others in equivalent roles and those about to step into these roles, particularly past participants on Senior Leadership Programmes.²⁶

There was more general online HR guidance on becoming a 'manager'. This was framed within an expectation that a new manager would be working within a hierarchical structure of line management.²⁷ It recommended 'working towards a qualification', giving the example of an 'Apprenticeship in Leadership', with a URL, though that link led to no such 'apprenticeship'. Cambridge's own 'Apprenticeships' webpage²⁸ led the enquirer to an external provider, the *Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education*, offering only a Level 6 apprenticeship for an 'Improvement Leader'.²⁹ Cambridge University offers no 'Degree Apprenticeships' itself.

Despite this patchy provision to equip its 'managers and leaders' the University has created through Human Resources a Leaders and Managers Network Community.³⁰ This includes 'members of staff who have professional responsibility for other members of staff at the University' in 'all areas, disciplines, staff groups and levels of responsibility', including those who were merely 'aspiring to a formal management position'.³¹ In a recent cluster of exchanges one manager asked:

'Does anyone know if there is a University policy (or even a best practice guidance) on the max number of people any one person can line manage effectively? – Creating a future/aspirational organisation chart for my area.'

Another said he would find useful 'an indication of what the University expects a line manager to do (minimum/ideal) and appropriate prioritisation of management responsibilities'. Others responded to this with their own views: for example, that he or she should 'be in a position to allocate sufficient time for 1-2-1s, staff/team development and management training/self-reflection, to meet the needs of their team as well as operational management/service provision'.

Yet another thought it was a matter of ‘span of control’ a ‘narrow span with more levels of reporting down the line’, could ‘give more development, growth, and advancement opportunities for all in a team’, though that could ‘lead to communication difficulties if not managed well’. A ‘wide span with flatter lines of reporting’ could be ‘more flexible and create more ownership and responsibility across the board but can lead to confusion when decisions need to be made.’ Another commented:

‘in a previous organisation I had a line manager who thought 8 reports was about the maximum number anyone should have. He favoured ‘a narrow span’ but wondered how to ‘avoid undermining line managers’.

He added, *‘[I have the micromanager gene:-< so want to avoid expressing it.]’*

A contributor who had:

‘circa 14 reporting to me, plus I was delivery manager, product manager, service manager and service owner for 4 University wide IT services/systems. It was a fight to get a new team leader under me.’ That achieved, the new subordinate ‘team leader’ was ‘approaching circa 14 again (due to service expansion), with likely more on the way (possibly to take it to 20+). But that required ‘investment’, and ‘the University, I sense, is running out of money’.

These comments express the best of intentions but hint at a certain lack of clarity in any training these line managers had received on a number of matters they were finding to be of importance in practice.

This all seems to raise questions for the University. Has the transition from ‘administration’ to ‘management’ in the roles of both academic-related UAS and academic staff been fully thought through either constitutionally or in terms of their employment contracts? And when will the creation of a ‘Senior Leadership Team’ be put to the Regent House with proposed definitions of its membership, powers and constitutional control as a recommendation for its approval? Without approving what is happening to the University’s governing body its members may find themselves ‘managed’ and ‘led’ to an extent which fundamentally threatens the survival of that academic democracy.

The University’s democratic robustness is clear from the list of rights of the members of the Regent House: ten members can request that a topic of concern be brought forward for discussion; fifty members may initiate a Grace for submission to the Regent House; twenty-five members may initiate a proposal for the amendment of a Grace already submitted but not yet approved; twenty-five members may submit a written request to the Vice-Chancellor for a vote to be taken on a Grace by ballot; ten members can make known their views on questions which are to be the subject of a ballot by issuing a statement as a fly-sheet for circulation. Signatures are now submitted digitally not on sheets of paper, but I remember being told some years ago when signatures were being sought to call a Non Placet on a proposed Grace that a Head of Department had placed a note on top of the signature sheet instructing members of the Department not to sign. On a different occasion another had been warned that if he

lent his signature to a proposed Amendment his future lab space would be reduced.

¹ Cornford.

² *Reporter*, 1 October, 2014.

³ *Reporter*, 26 October, 2016.

⁴ *Reporter*, 14 June, 2017.

⁵ *Reporter*, 31 May, 2018 and 5 February, 2020.

⁶ *Reporter* 28 September, 2020.

⁷ In response to a Wass Syndicate proposal towards the reform of the University’s administration *The Report of the Syndicate appointed to consider the government of the University* (*Reporter*, 1988-9).

⁸ *Reporter*, 21 March, 2001.

⁹ <https://www.training.cam.ac.uk/cppd/info/eligibility>

¹⁰ <https://www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk/leadership-development>

¹¹ *Reporter*, 29 October 2003.

¹² Special Ordinance C (ii)4.

¹³ https://www.recruitment.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/established_academic_standard_terms_and_conditions_-_june_2021.pdf

https://www.recruitment.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/established_academic_teaching_and_scholarship_contract_dec_2021.pdf

https://www.recruitment.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/unestablished_academic_teaching_and_scholarship_contract_dec_2021.pdf

https://www.recruitment.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/unestablished_and_research_staff_standard_terms_-_june_2021.pdf

¹⁴ *Reporter*, 16 December, 1999.

¹⁵ *Reporter*, 13 December, 2000.

¹⁶ *Reporter*, 9 May, 2002.

¹⁷ *Reporter*, 10 and 22 July, 2002.

¹⁸ *Reporter*, 11 December, 2018.

¹⁹ <https://www.staff.admin.cam.ac.uk/general-news/two-new-development-programmes-for-individuals-managers-and-leaders>

²⁰ *Reporter*, 24 March, 2021.

²¹ https://www.acp.br.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/acp_guidance_-_head_of_institution_guidance_sep_2022.pdf

²² For exaple [br.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/grade_12_professor.pdf](https://www.br.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/grade_12_professor.pdf)

²³ https://www.br.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/retirement_policy_and_ejra_review_group.pdf

²⁴ <https://training.cam.ac.uk/cppd/theme/leadmanagage?provide-rlid=36612>

²⁵ https://www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/slp_briefings_v5.pdf

²⁶ <https://training.cam.ac.uk/cppd/event/4287305>

²⁷ <https://www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk/leadership-development/becoming-manager>

²⁸ <https://www.apprenticeships.admin.cam.ac.uk/managers/providers>

²⁹ <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/improvement-leader-v1-0>

³⁰ <https://www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk/leadership-development/leaders-and-managers-network>

³¹ <https://web.yammer.com/main/org/universityofcambridgecloud.onmicrosoft.com/groups/eyJfdHlwZSI6Ikd5b3VwIiwiaWQiOiI1M-jk5ODg1NjcwNCJ9/all>

REVIEWS

Concise Record of the North Reforms

G.R.Evans, *After 'North': two decades of change at Oxford University*, 2022, Privately published (printed by Holywell Press Ltd). ISBN 978-1-3999-2918-9 pp205. Copies supplied at; gre1001@cam.ac.uk



Gill Evans has put together a concise record of the North reforms, together with the many other internal and governmental reports, commissions and proposals since Franks, which helped shape the North Commission's reflections.

The constant background, necessarily, was the structures and practices of an ancient university that were the subject and the target of critical comments. Oxford is always being criticised, so is always on the defensive. Nobody now, after all, would design a university like this – too many independent colleges, too many unmanaged voices, too much wasteful discussion, not to mention all that self-organised individual teaching which can lead anywhere. Yet annoyingly successful withal. Still, outside agencies prefer to see quite different norms met: prompt decision-making, a central executive power, external advisers from the 'real world', a managed work-force, graduates (preferably in science) as a product to serve the economy. Sounds plausible.

Over the period covered, the public tone towards universities had changed. The gentlemanly University Grants Committee had been abolished, leaving not much of the Haldane principle of keeping a buffer between government and the funding of universities. In 1993 outgoing Vice-Chancellor Richard Southwood recalled that universities had once been in favour as appropriate recipients of public money, helping the nation rebuild after the Second World War. Now in sharp contrast they met with 'harsh criticism and even contempt' for allegedly 'squandering tax-payers' money'. The text-payer would acquire near-mythic status in further government rhetoric without one of them ever voicing a view. Tenure was abolished, research productivity was periodically tested, teaching was checked up on as far as could be done.

Ironically, about this time, Onora O'Neill was giving the Reith lectures on the social value of trust. Relations were not helped when Congregation, in protest against the savage financial cuts across the whole Higher Education sector, refused Margaret Thatcher an honorary degree. Funding in any case now shifted away from block grant to dependence on income from student fees, which replaced liberating grants with debts to burden students' later years.

How far would North come to meet those outside expectations? In the cause of decisiveness, it replaced a General Board

– whose dispensations had long been admired for even-handedness among subjects – with four subject-specific Divisions. It instituted a high-salaried long-term (7-year) Vice-Chancellor, who could settle in to be proactive. But when the first holder, John Hood, duly attempted his own reforms in tune with the modern norms, they were rejected by Congregation. The ancient plenum could still block the modern centre. Congregation would always be the reformer's problem: as the ultimate deciding voice in the University's original constitution, it was never going to vote itself out of existence. It remained a unique embodiment of academic self-government.

Still, the tone became steadily more administrative. 'Corporate plan', 'strategic plan', 'senior leaders'... Numerically, there was a growth, not to say hypertrophy, of administrative posts, even when money was short for academic replacements, a serious failure of trust. There were controversies on the side – on titles, on recognition and differential pay, on the compulsory age of retirement, this last sometimes successfully contested.

Criticisms of Oxford still come in and no doubt always will. But the best answer remains, as it has long been, that we are always somewhere at the top of the ratings. Post-North Oxford still works.

JIM REED

Contents			
Preface	i	III Since 2009: new policy and new practice in Oxford's governance	63
Acknowledgements	ii	(i) From Andrew Hamilton to Louise Richardson	63
Acronyms	v	(ii) The new Strategic Plan: a growing emphasis on capital expenditure	78
Abbreviations	vii	(iii) Oxford's new Strategic Plan: a growth agenda	83
Introduction	01	(iv) 'Crisis management'	85
I Oxford's last self-review (1994-2004)	07	Conclusion	90
(i) The University's concerns in the early nineties	07	Annex A How it all works	99
(ii) A new review?	12	Annex B Academic democracy in operation	109
(iii) The Commission of Inquiry begins work	13	Annex C The colleges and the students	119
(iv) The main North recommendations	18	Annex D Professional Services and University Administration	129
(v) The Joint Working Party on Governance	21	Annex E Communication and the Public Affairs Directorate	137
(vi) 1998-9 The enactment of the North reforms	23	Annex F The changing experience of academic employment in the University	141
(vii) New Statutes, new Regulations	27	Annex G Benefactors and the ethics of donations	157
(viii) The independently developing role of Congregation	30	Annex H Library provision	163
(ix) The reflections of the last old-style Vice-Chancellor	32	Annex I The need for more space for laboratory provision	173
II The first new-style Vice-Chancellor seeks governance change (2004-9)	37	Annex J The background to the North Review: 1960-1995	177
(i) Oxford in the national context in the immediate post-North period	37	Chronology	194
(ii) The new Vice-Chancellor takes stock	43	Table of legislation	198
(iii) Replacement of the promised five-year review with new governance-change proposals	45	Reports, Reviews, Green and White Papers	199
(iv) The aftermath	59	Select bibliography	201
		Index	204

Don Giovanni, Glyndebourne, 21 June 2023

The Rake's Progress, Glyndebourne, 20 August 2023



Nine years to the day since we last saw *'Don Giovanni'* at Glyndebourne, we were back for one of this season's new productions.

First performed in Prague in 1787, *'Don Giovanni'* is the tale of the eponymous charming, womanising and unscrupulous anti-hero. Whilst seeking to force his advances on Donna Anna, he is interrupted by her father, the Commendatore, whom he kills in a duel. He then spies a pretty woman lamenting betrayal by her lover and seeks to provide solace, not initially realising that the woman is Donna Elvira, whom he himself has recently dumped. Upon encountering a couple soon to be wed, he tries to seduce Zerlina whilst separating her from her fiancée Musetto. In the meantime, Donna Anna has told Don Ottavio that she will not marry him until he avenges her father's death. Elvira, Anna and Ottavio seek to kill Don Giovanni at the wedding party, but the latter has exchanged clothes with his valet Leporello and so escapes. Leporello complains to his master that he cannot continue with this lifestyle, but some gold leads him to change his mind. Whilst the two discuss the night's events in the graveyard, the statue on the tomb of the Commendatore warns that their laughter will be short lived, at which Don Giovanni instructs his valet to invite the statue to dinner. The statue duly arrives at Don Giovanni's house for dinner, Don Giovanni refuses to repent, so the statue takes him down to hell. All observe that this is the just fate of a wicked man.

In the programme notes Director Mariame Clément is at pains to claim that *'Don Giovanni'* can speak to a contemporary audience and that "*it is not just a #MeToo piece*". Yet this also underlines the production's principal flaw, namely that Don Giovanni himself (Andrey Zhilikhovsky) comes across as an unpleasant scheming sleaze-merchant, whereas for the intended ambivalence to work the character needs to have something of the loveable rogue about him. After all, despite all that has happened, Elvira (Armenian born soprano Ruzan Mantashyan) cannot stop herself loving him.

I thought Mantashyan was very good: she sang well and also expressed movingly the self-recrimination about her feelings for him. Venera Gimadieva's Donna Anna was a more straightforward characterisation, predominantly vengeful, apart from

near the end when she realises she may have pushed Ottavio too far and needs to make up to him. Tenor Oleksiy Palchykov (Ottavio) had a fine voice, which was showcased more in the second half, whereas Victoria Randem's bubbly Zerlina struck me more in the first half. I have seen productions of *'Don Giovanni'* where Leporello (here played by Mikhail Timoshenko) stole the show, but this was not one of them. This is not to say it was sung poorly or devoid of characterisation, just that it was not a stand out performance.

My overall impression of the set was disappointing, it was plain with a staircase to an upper floor which had rooms running off it. The arrival of the statue lacked the dramatic impact I have seen in other productions. That said, the lighting of the stage for Don Giovanni's descent in to hell, with flames twinkling below floor level was first class, coupled with the image of the statue looming over Don Giovanni as he grasps him for his final journey. Some of the costume effects worked well, such as the pink Stetsons and high-heeled boots for Zerlina's hen night party; others less so, such as the balaclavas for Musetto's friends which came across as more menacing than I thought was required. The listing of Don Giovanni's many conquests was accompanied by portraits of their breasts, demonstrating all shapes and sizes. My immediate reaction was to question whether a male director would have done that for a contemporary audience? It didn't add to the story and felt like someone was making a point. There again, I may be over-thinking something which was simply meant to raise a laugh through being unexpected.

Glyndebourne debutant conductor Evan Rogister was excellent, keeping a good lively tempo with the right balance between orchestra and singers. The orchestra was the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, playing period instruments with their gorgeous mellow tones, justifiably receiving prolonged applause at the curtain.

'Don Giovanni' has highly memorable music with a number of well known arias, plenty of action and a dramatic finale. Yet this has the downside of setting expectation levels somewhat high. Notwithstanding some lovely music, and three or four very good soloists, I was left feeling that this performance had not hit the high spots of some other productions of this marvellous work. It was an enjoyable evening, but not a great one.

Vintage Glyndebourne

It was a glorious summer's day in East-Sussex and we had not seen so many picnickers on the lawn for years. The production was using the marvellous set designed by David Hockney back in 1975, there was not a weak link in the cast and the London Philharmonic Orchestra was splendid: it was

vintage Glyndebourne!

'The Rake's Progress' was Stravinsky's only full length opera and was inspired by seeing an exhibition of Hogarth's satirical drawings *'The Rake's Progress'* in Chicago in 1947. The libretto, in English, was written by W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman after several visits to Stravinsky's Californian home, with the first performance of the opera at La Fenice in Venice in 1951 (the first performance at Glyndebourne was less than two years later). Hockney's staging, with its distinctive cross-hatching designs and extensive use of black and white, is set in Hogarth's eighteenth century London and designed to remind one of Hogarth's prints. The period costumes serve to reinforce this atmosphere.

The tale is that of a feckless impecunious country gentleman, Tom Rakewell, in love with Anne Truelove. His prospective father in law offers him a job in the city, which he declines, preferring to leave matters to chance. At this point Nick Shadow appears, tells Tom that an uncle has died leaving Tom a fortune and leads him away to the city, where he succumbs to the infernal temptations of Mother Goose's brothel, marriage to Baba, a bearded lady from the circus, and finally financial ruin. Nick then claims payment for his services over the past year and a day, namely Tom's soul, but Tom wins a game of cards thereby keeping his soul but at the cost of Nick rendering him mad. Anne, who has never stopped loving Tom, comes to visit Tom in Bedlam but realises that there is nothing anyone can do to help him now. The moral of the tale is that the Devil finds work for idle hands.

I hesitate to disagree with a professor of musicology who in the programme notes says "there is more than a passing resemblance between the anti-heroes, The Rake and (Mozart's) Don Giovanni", but I am with Baba when she says to Anne of Tom and Nick "I know which is snake and which is victim". Whilst Tom might be complainant in his downfall, he has none of the calculated wickedness of the Don. Indeed, he believes he is helping humanity with his device to turn stone into bread, which leads to his financial ruin (this futile investment has shades of the 18th century scandal of the South Sea bubble).

Hockney's set uses colour as a key indicator in the story: the first act is the only one in which green predominates, where all is natural and innocent in Anne's garden. There is red in Tom's jacket, but this colour becomes more prevalent during Tom's fall (for example, in the brothel and the livery of the footmen at Tom's house). Nick wears black, and black and white feature when things have gone wrong: the crowd at the auction have dark clothes with powdered white faces, the scene in the graveyard is dark and finally in Bedlam the twenty four cells (three rows of eight) are filled with poor souls in black tops wearing grotesque white masks. These souls could represent either fellow inmates or the tortured work-

ings of Tom's mind. In his deluded state, he sees himself as Adonis, Anne as Venus and appeals to the pantheon of Greek gods, so the masks could equally be those associated with classical Greek tragedy.

The cast was excellent. Soprano Louise Alder sang her high notes effortlessly and with much tenderness, conveying her ongoing love for Tom despite his erring. Her leave taking of Tom at the end was poignant as we know she knows there is no way back; she comforts him like a small child. Bass baritone Sam Carl's Nick displayed great characterisation, beguiling and persuasive, and his voice had a rich deep tone. Thomas Atkins' Tom had the requisite level of naivete, gullibility and greed, but also wistfulness when thinking of Anne. Mezzo Alisa Kolova's Baba showed the irritation at being kept waiting in her sedan chair, her temper around the matrimonial breakfast table but also her kindness and understanding in her 'girl to girl' talk with Anne. As always, the chorus did whatever was required of it with aplomb, whether it be the bawdiness of the brothel or the despair (and clipped responses) of Bedlam. My favourite scene was the auction, with the elaborately amusing bidding for Tom's possessions followed by the unveiling of Baba as one of the objects for sale and her subsequent driving everyone out of the house, whilst Tom and Nick can be heard singing in the street. A full stage, with lots going on and plenty of humour!

Glyndebourne stalwart Robin Ticciati was clearly enjoying himself and conducted the LPO at a good pace, receiving a very warm reception from the cognoscenti. The LPO was a perfect timbre for a twentieth century composer, yet the use of the harpsichord, particularly in the graveyard scene between Tom and Nick, highlighted the eighteenth century setting of the piece.

This was a super production. I loved the set and can understand why it has stood the test of time, the music was engaging and there were no weak links in the cast. A grand day out!

TIM WICKENS

Fair Oxford, or, an alma mater

(to 'The Ash Grove', Welsh trad.)¹

Fair Oxford, how gracious, how plainly 'tis speaking;
the bells through her ringing have language for me.
Whenever the light o'er her limestone is setting,
praises unbidden from my spirit doth spring.
The host that is coming before now receive us,
to outstretchéd hands fling we the torch aflame.²
First illumination of God o'er these Isles;³
fair Oxford, fair Oxford, alone is my home.

Down yonder green meadow where streamlets meander,
when twilight is fading I pensively rove.
Beneath the high arches, low cloisters, quadrangles:
pilgrim returning to the flower'ed lair of youth.
From ev'ry dark nook they press forward to greet me:
the faces I long for again gather here;
around us with gladness the waters were bubbling,
but then little thought I how soon we would part.

Adieu now, dear Oxford, we leave thee our mother,
whatever we had gavest thou us again.⁴
May glowing thy star e'er this land bold to counsel,
and give to thy children the fruits of thine age.
With freedom to think and with honour to bear,
and bravely for right e'er to live and to strive.⁵
So till time shall be done, and eternity near,
thy children, fair Oxford, shall exult in thy peace.

ALEXANDER YEN

¹ With much credit to the original, traditional, lyrics.

² Newbolt, 'Vitai Lampada'.

³ *Dominus Illuminatio Mea*.

⁴ Belloc, 'To the Balliol Men Still in Africa'.

⁵ Gilman, 'Fair Harvard'.

Alexander Yen is a postgraduate in international relations at Green Templeton College, having been an undergraduate in history and politics at Magdalen College. His interests include university ceremonial and traditions.

CONTENTS

No.456 Noughth Week Michaelmas Term 2023

Something needs to change BEN BOLLIG, TIM HORDER	1	Titles matter- lessons from Cambridge G.R.EVANS	19
Reminders	3	Review – Concise Record of the North Reforms G.R.EVANS	22
Exposure HERMIONE LEE	6	Review – <i>Don Giovanni</i> , Glyndebourne, <i>The Rake's Progress</i> , Glyndebourne, TIM WICKENS	23
Stanley Gibbons BERNARD O'DONOGHUE	6	Fair Oxford ALEXANDER YEN	24
The souls of the people of Oxford DANNY DORLING	7		
Notes from Ivory flats ROBERT FOLEY	17		

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Danny Dorling is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography • Robert Foley is Leverhulme Professor Emeritus and Fellow of King's College, Cambridge • G.R. Evans was Professor of Medieval Theology and Intellectual History at Cambridge • Jim Reed is Emeritus Fellow of Queen's and an earlier long-term editor of *Oxford Magazine* • Tim Wickens is an Opera enthusiast and friend of the late Peter Schofield, who reviewed opera for *Oxford Magazine*